

THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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A New Way to Build Schools in an Urban Setting

By Councilmember Toni Atkins

Providing diverse and progressive educational opportunities and training programs, public safety, infrastructure and housing are critical to the success and growth of our city. It is imperative that we continue to invest in facilities and services that contribute to education, career development, leisure, culture and the arts.

To achieve these goals we have to encourage our public institutions to work together in ways that they never have before. Agencies cannot afford to work in isolation. A prime example of how well this can work is the Model School Project Joint Powers Authority (JPA) which was recently approved unanimously by the San Diego City Council and Housing Agency, and on a majority vote of the San Diego Unified School Board.

The goal of the JPA is to establish a new model for urban school development. The model should be fashioned with the understanding that land is too precious to use for only a few hours a day, and recognition of the tremendous dislocation of housing that occurs every time a new urban school is sited. With this in mind, leaders in the community and our local agencies have come together to address the challenge of how we mitigate the loss of housing on a new school site, while at the same time creating new educational, recreational, and social opportunities. Each JPA member brings their own unique talents to the table in an effort to solve not only the financial logistics involved in such an ambitious project, but the complex regulatory, social and community issues as well.

The outcome of this discussion is a new model for school development that will be introduced in City Heights, a community that is no stranger to innovative, award-winning urban redevelopment projects. This model project is being built in a manner that maximizes public resources, brings important City services to City Heights residents and citizens of surrounding neighborhoods, revitalizes the core of the community and establishes a pedestrian-friendly town square.

A team of architects was hired to test this concept on an actual proposed school site, comparing a traditional development program to this new urban model. At a standard school site, the new facility would displace 180 mostly affordable housing units, without replacing them. There would be a playing field hidden behind school buildings, surface parking, and no significant addition to open space.

Compare this to the Model School concept: The Mid-City Model School Study would accommodate 700 children, grades K through 6, including a pre-school facility. If developed in this manner, an approximate 6.5 acre site would include a two-story school building as well as open space/play areas designed from the start to maximize joint-use opportunities. The model school concept also attempts to minimize the development footprint by providing

underground parking. Community and social services facilities--also included in the project--will include a childcare center, a counseling center and a community health clinic. Commercial and mixed-use aspects may include neighborhood retail, multi-family residential and live/work units. Open space would include both active and passive recreational park space, and the possibility of restoring more than six acres of degraded canyon. Clearly, this far exceeds what we've come to expect in the way of new school construction projects in San Diego.

Our goal is to make strategic investments in our neighborhoods and public services that will provide long-term benefits to the community, improve educational possibilities and help the school district provide high-quality service. Regardless of the economy, there are never enough resources to address all of the good ideas and all the community needs that come forward. In fact, at this point in time, given the economic uncertainties as well as state and local budget concerns and shortfalls, this may be our best opportunity to help maximize resources and cover as many of these ideas and needs as possible.

Every citizen should have an opportunity to afford decent, safe and sanitary housing. In this JPA, the City and its partners are committed to expand and preserve the supply and improve the quality of affordable housing for the elderly, the disabled and low- and moderate-income families.

The missing--and essential--element in developing promising strategies to overcome the problems of "poverty amid prosperity" has been this kind of local, pro-active, joint agency effort. Local governments, including the city and school district, must have the freedom and tools to carry out their responsibilities. Agencies cannot continue to operate in a vacuum.

The JPA puts us in a good position to establish San Diego as a model city where all our residents take great pride in living and working here. With this commitment to our neighborhoods and residents we have made a bold first step toward this goal.

Toni Atkins represents the 3rd District on the San Diego City Council, which includes much of the mid-city area.

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